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ABSTRACT

The role of the State educational agency has shifted from inspections giving and statistics gathering to a new one which finds the agency at the hub of local, State, and Federal information transmittal. This emerging role holds great promise for effective Statewide improvement in education, because relatively new leader-manager expectations of the SEA are beginning to crystallize--especially in the area of information systems. This paper has been prepared to assist State educational agencies that are considering restructuring their operations to better meet the needs for timely information in a cost-effective method. It discusses the alternatives and states a position for the problem areas of forms management and data collection procedures. (Author/WM)

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POSITION PAPER

ON FORMS MANAGEMENT

FOR MANAGEMENT INFORMATION SYSTEMS

FOR

STATE EDUCATIONAL AGENCIES

Presented From

CCSSO'S
Committee on Coordinating Educational Information
Dr. C. Taylor Whittier, Chairman

and

Committee on Evaluation and Information Systems
Mr. Jerry Barton, Chairman

Written By

James E. Mitchell, Iowa
W. E. Ellis, South Carolina

June 1974

PREFACE

This paper is to assist state educational agencies (SEA's) which are considering restructuring their operations to better meet the needs for timely information in a cost-effective method. The purpose of the paper is to discuss the alternatives and to state a position for the problem areas of forms management and data collection procedures. However, it is not intended to restrict SEA's or to infringe on their rights to establish procedures different from those contained in this paper.

The task of developing a position paper was assigned to the writers by the CEIS Executive Board and State Coordinators at the annual meeting of October 1973. The writers assume responsibility for the contents of the paper, but also want to express appreciation to the many people who have assisted with its development. These people include the members of the Subcommittees of CEIS, MIS/CCD and Data Standards; the CEIS State Coordinators from California, Colorado, Maryland, Michigan, and New York for the materials supplied from these states; and the many other individuals who have supplied oral comments.

A draft of this paper has been presented to the CEIS State Coordinators and to the Council's Committee on Coordinating Educational Information. It was approved by both groups with the suggestion it be distributed to all SEA's.

James E. Mitchell, Iowa

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FORMS MANAGEMENT FOR MANAGEMENT INFORMATION SYSTEMS

A POSITION PAPER

Philosophy and Rationale

The role of the state educational agency (SEA) has shifted from inspectoral and statistical gathering to a new one which finds the agency at the hub of local, state, and federal information transmittal. This emerging role holds great promise for effective statewide improvements in education because relatively new leader-manager expectations of the SEA are beginning to crystalize. This is especially true in the area of information systems.

State Education Agencies are beginning to realize that traditional, manually operated information systems, the application-oriented systems of the past, are not meeting the demands of the present and will not meet the demands of the future. Such systems are not efficient, accurate, or timely and are not economical in terms of cost benefits. Increased demands for better quality, greater quantity, and faster retrieval of data have caused SEA's to focus upon more efficient information management practices.

A viable information system is an organized arrangement for making the right information available to those who need it, when they need it, in the desired format and at the least possible cost. The use of a systems approach is the key to dealing with information in that it provides systematic organization, collection procedures, processing, information dissemination, and coordination.

The Problem

It has been said that to control an institution one needs only to control the budget or the institution's information. If this is true,

information management deserves the same attention as budget management. The position that is taken in this paper is that forms control is a necessary component of any attempt to manage the agency's information.

The principle underlying an information system may be simply stated: data that are accurately defined, properly collected and processed, categorized and stored can readily be retrieved and reported. Thus, there are two fundamentals of an information system: establishing a data base and retrieving data from that base. Although these principles may be simply stated, it is certainly much more difficult to bring them into reality. In the jargon of data processing, these two factors are referred to as input and output. The purpose of this paper is to discuss procedures for the input--management of forms for data collection.

Position

An information system can only be as good as the data from which it is built. If definitions are developed in a haphazard manner, they will be reflected in the data base. To insure that definitions are provided and understood, a systematic approach (forms management) must be established. Policies must be established and carried into practice which support all aspects of forms management. Purposes of forms management policies include:

1. avoid duplication of data items collected by the staff;
2. assist staff members in the design and collection documents;
3. ascertain the reasons which necessitate the collection of data;
4. review all instructions and terminology used in data collection;
5. assist staff members in determining cost effectiveness of data collection efforts;
6. cause an annual data plan to be created and enforced[1];

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[1]The management information administrative unit should be responsible for the monitoring of the forms management functions. Such monitoring must include the reporting of "bootleg" forms used by department personnel. Sometimes other units like the one screening printing requests can be invaluable in detecting forms. The forms management unit should have a "signoff" by the assignment of an official "form number."

7. structuring and categorizing data and information elements; and
8. developing a plan with the user which would include data items, definitions, instructions, time schedules for printing, dissemination and return, processing and analysis schedules, and also a description of the final reports with target population.

Perhaps one more point should be added concerning accuracy. Accuracy should be the first criterion and must precede all others--if data cannot be collected accurately, it should not be collected at all.

A statewide educational information system requires that a central body within the state education agency be given responsibility and authority for coordinating all data handling. The central body must be a separately organized administrative unit supported by a commitment of other parallel units within the agency. Adequate staffing must be provided to assure competent leadership, continuity in development, and efficiency in operation. Requests for data or information from both within and outside the department should be channeled through this administrative unit or office. In turn, the requests should be evaluated in terms of:

1. whether the data requested are already available within the system;
2. the SEA's responsibility for providing the requested data considering the overall objectives and commitments of the agency;
3. the feasibility of collecting new or different data, i.e., the relative value of having the data compared with the time and effort required of the school and agency personnel to get it; and
4. the value and benefits of the processed data and reports to LEA's.

Agency coordination and practical procedures for the evaluation of all requests will assist in eliminating data collection that is unnecessary, undesirable, unfeasible, or redundant.

The systematic approach to forms management should not only include the designation of a person, unit, or section in the SEA that would perform the function of forms management, but also a representative advisory group--data users. This group of people should be primarily responsible for the data presently being collected and for its use or reports.

The users group should be advisory to the forms management unit which, in turn, has the responsibility of coordinating the entire data collection process. Nevertheless, both groups must be cognizant of the State and Federal requirements and sensitive to the needs of the SEA and LEA's. The shared duties should include but not be limited to the following:

1. developing the policy statements concerning data and detailed operational procedures;
2. reviewing all existing data collection requirements[2]--the result of this review would result in a data dictionary of all items, forms, and how and when the data are reported; and
3. establishing criteria to be used to evaluate new requests which must include reasons for collection, forms design, instructions, definitions, worth, and cost.

The advisory group, together with the forms management unit, must be effective in working with the SEA staff in the management and control of its data needs if the MIS function is to be effective. It must progress to the point where it is working at least one year into the future in identifying data needs and procedures.

The forms management unit, the advisory group, the establishment of viable policies, and the commitment to the entire process by the Chief State School Officer are all critical for the success of the forms management effort.

Conclusion

The principal ingredient for the success of any management information system is an active forms management process backed by the firm commitment and support of the Chief State School Officer. Without such support and authority, the system will fail. This cannot be stated strongly enough.

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[2]The Federal Government as well as numerous states refer to the products of this function as an "annual data plan."

It is extremely important to the successful operation of the forms management function to be established with the philosophical position that the function is one to provide service. Control of forms should be viewed as a "positive assistance" rather than a "negative constraint." The forms management unit should be available to provide expert assistance for the layout of forms, the wording of the questions, sequencing of data items, and the preparation of instructions. This requires specific skills which are not common among the professional staff members who have not had related training or experience.[3]

It is recommended that serious consideration be given to the establishment of a forms management unit within each state education agency. The purposes of such a unit should be to provide a ready source of information about forms and data items collected and to assist all other units within the agency in managing their data collection task and reporting needs.

The establishment of the forms management function within an SEA will not immediately solve all the data problems, but it will provide a logical procedure for managing and controlling these problems. It is only after a realistic elapse of time that the problem of data collection will be under control. This realistic period of time will depend upon commitment and resources allocated to the task. However, even with little or no additional resources, one can accomplish a great deal with the assignment of the function. It is a positive step which should be taken and perhaps this paper will assist you.

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[3]This does not mean that management information system staff are capable of meeting all users' needs. Data collection ranges from an exact science to a "black art." No management information function can meet all needs--the state-of-the-art of measure in the human science does not provide such luxury.